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SUBJECT: Mejlis Speaker Nurberdiyeva Meeting with Adams Del:
Careful but Positive

REFS: ASHGABAT 137

Summary

1. (SBU) During a January 31 meeting with EUR/ACE Coordinator Tom Adams, USAID Assistant Administrator Doug Menarchik and USAID Senior Democracy and Governance Advisor Eric Rudenshiould, the new Speaker of Turkmenistan's Mejlis (Parliament), Akja Nurberdiyeva, signaled cautious interest in cooperation with the U.S. Government. Although she did not express concrete interest in any of the several initiatives raised by delegation members, Nurberdiyeva said she hoped that Turkmenistan would become (more) democratic and outlined her most immediate legislation priorities, including agricultural and pension reform, a new law against money-laundering and terrorist financing, new labor and civil codes, and a new criminal procedure code. Stating that the Mejlis could and would reach out to foreign missions when it needed assistance, she reaffirmed that such contacts would continue to channelled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. End Summary.

Nurberdiyeva: A True Believer on Social Issues

2. (SBU) Although the embassy is still waiting for an MFA response to a request for a meeting for the Charge with Nurberdiyeva submitted in December, the Adams delegation's meeting, one of 11 requested through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Adams visit, was amazingly easy to arrange. Adams, Menarchik and Rudenshiould found the Mejlis speaker charismatic and, while careful, a "real believer" on social issues.

Mejlis Priorities: Agriculture and Pension Reform, Fighting Money-laundering

3. (SBU) Adams noted that, in the United States, Congress played an important role and Americans had much respect for a well-run legislature, which was a key to good democracy in any country. Reporting that he had a good meeting with Foreign Minister Meredov

(reftel), Adams said that the United States wanted to work with the Mejlis to promote a peaceful, stable transition to a new government.

The United States wanted to assist Turkmenistan to deepen democracy. Options included exchanges involving legislators, including the speaker herself, and assistance in drafting new agricultural and election laws.

¶4. (SBU) Nurberdiyeva reported that Turkmenistan's lawmaking organs were working on a number of documents, including:

-- The presidential election law adopted at the December 2006 session of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council). It had sought to promote wider participation by citizens, and new roles for public association and political parties.

-- Documents for the 20th session of the Halk Maslahaty in March, which would focus on agricultural and social reform.

-- A draft law on fighting money-laundering and terrorist financing.

-- Other legislation, including new labor and civil codes.

The government was publishing any significant laws and was soliciting public feedback. In addition, Turkmenistan television had a weekly "Parliamentary Hour" show, which provided commentary on laws and responded to viewer questions. According to Nurberdiyeva, the program was very popular"

Adams: U.S. Happy to Assist Mejlis

¶5. (SBU) Adams pointed out that a number of areas were difficult to

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legislate. For example, a good law on fighting money-laundering and terrorist financing needed to attack criminals, but should not discourage legal investment and business transactions. He also noted the difficulty of the transition from being part of the former Soviet Union to becoming a democratic country with a market economy.

The United States was happy to assist, if the Mejlis wished.

Nurberdiyeva: Mejlis Welcomes Foreign Assistance

¶6. (SBU) Nurberdiyeva said that the Mejlis always tried to draw on the experience of other countries and welcomed methodological assistance. However, all such assistance needed to be channeled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, Turkmenistan planned to work actively with the OSCE, and the Mejlis had sent parliamentarians on exchanges to France and Sweden. Adams agreed that exchanges were good; strong democracy helped with the economy. Both France and Sweden had strong, rather than rubberstamp, parliaments, and the United States was looking for ways to strengthen Turkmenistan's parliamentary tradition. (Note: When the embassy translator stumbled over the Russian word for "rubberstamp," Nurberdiyeva laughed and said she completely understood the concept. End Note.)

But No Commitment on Specific U.S. Programs

¶7. (SBU) Adams said that the provincial elections in late 2007 and the 2008 parliamentary elections as important as the presidential elections. Adams had met with the election support delegation from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which had taken the same plane from Frankfurt. The United States applauded Turkmenistan for giving ODIHR permission to look at Turkmenistan's elections. He noted that the United States had worked well with the OSCE in many countries to improve the election process; this was complicated, because all countries -- including the United States -- could always do more to improve their elections.

¶8. (SBU) Rudenshiould briefly discussed election and legislative assistance programs that USAID was carrying out in Azerbaijan and

elsewhere. The United States was eager to help, but viewed the relationship as a partnership; the U.S. Government needed to know Turkmenistan's interests in order to respond.

¶9. Nurberdiyeva outlined programs which the Mejlis was carrying out with other international organizations, including a program on children's rights with UNICEF. The Mejlis also was meeting with women and children at the local and district level and was seeking to use what it had learned in Sweden to meet regularly with youth, "our future deputies."

Anti-Trafficking in Persons Legislation

¶10. (SBU) Noting that even though Turkmenistan did not have a significant trafficking in persons (TIP) problem, the Charge asked where Turkmenistan stood in drafting anti-TIP legislation. The U.S. embassy had given the Mejlis draft Tajikistan legislation on TIP; ABA-CEELI also had some good people in Turkmenistan and could assist the Mejlis with this issue. The Speaker responded that the Mejlis has already drafted anti-TIP legislation as a prophylactic measure; after a review period, it would definitely be implemented. Smiling, she added, "It is not a problem. You (the Charge) know how we love our women."

"I Hope and Believe Turkmenistan Will Be Democratic"

¶11. (SBU) The Charge noted that there were two other legislative initiatives of high priority to the United States: implementing legislation for Turkmenistan's participation in IAEA's proliferation security initiative and final approval of the criminal code

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completed almost two years ago. Nurberdiyeva answered that following up on legislation required by international agreements and conventions remained a Mejlis priority. As for the criminal procedure code, the Mejlis had sent the draft code and a request for suggestions to law enforcement bodies in January. The Mejlis wanted to adopt the code because it dealt with human rights issues. Also, there was a law on women's rights; it was always important to address women's issues. In addition, the March session of the Halk Maslahaty would deal with other problems, including pensions, education and social benefits. "Turkmenistan, I hope and believe, will be democratic," she added.

¶12. (SBU) Menarchik and Adams both stressed that the Mejlis should contact the U.S. Embassy if any of the programs that had been mentioned were of interest. Nurberdiyeva laughed and nodded when Adams told her not to be shy if there was an area where the United States could help. Smiling, she responded that the Mejlis always contacted foreign diplomatic missions when it needed assistance. Turkmenistan was a young country and wanted respect. However, in general, the people of Turkmenistan were open to new ways of doing things. She believed that it would be helpful for all to travel around the country and suggest new areas of cooperation; elections would offer a good opportunity to learn more and would give impetus to democratic development.

Comment and Biographic Notes

¶13. (SBU) Since her ascent to the Mejlis leadership just slightly more than a month ago, Nurberdiyeva has succeeded in solidifying her position as the most powerful woman in Turkmenistan. As such, she is a welcome change: her wit, charm and reputation for genuinely caring about social issues stands at odds with the more distant, authoritarian approach common with most officials in Turkmenistan. At any protocol events where women sat separately, she generally has been at the center, with the Minister of Culture and the Deputy Governor of Ahal on either side. Nurberdiyeva also had special responsibility for escorting late President Niyazov's family during the variety of funeral and wake events. It appears that Nurberdiyeva is a part of the new regime, and post sees in her careful but generally positive presentation during the meeting a signal that she, too, wants to increase interaction, but only after

the inauguration and only -- for the moment -- through the Ministry
of Foreign Affairs. End Comment.

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